

# *Khonds*

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**Khonds** (also spelt **Kondha**, **Kandha** etc.) are a [tribal](#) community in [India](#). Traditionally [hunter-gatherers](#), they are divided into the hill-dwelling Khonds and plain-dwelling Khonds for census purposes; all the Khonds identify by their clan and usually hold large tracts of fertile land but still practice hunting, gathering and [slash-and-burn](#) agriculture in the forests as a symbol of their connection to and ownership of the forest. Khonds speak the [Kui](#) and [Kuvi](#) languages and write them in [Odia script](#).

The Khonds are adept land-dwellers, exhibiting greater adaptability to the forest environment. However, due to development interventions in education, medical facilities, [irrigation](#), plantation and so on, they are forced into the modern way of life in many ways. Their traditional life style, customary traits of economy, political organisation, norms, values and world view have been drastically changed over a long period.

They are a designated Scheduled Tribe in the states of Andhra Pradesh, Bihar, Chhattisgarh, Madhya Pradesh, Maharashtra, Odisha and West Bengal.<sup>[2]</sup>

## Language

The Khonds speak the Kui language as their mother tongue. It is most closely related to Gondi, and Kuvi. Kui is a Dravidian language written with the Odia script.<sup>[3]</sup>

## Society

The Khonds are adept land dwellers exhibiting greater adaptability to the forest and hill environment. However, due to development interventions in education, medical facilities, irrigation, plantation and so on, they are forced into the modern way of life in many ways. Their traditional life style, customary traits of economy, political organisation, norms, values and world

### Khonds



A Khond woman in Odisha

### Regions with significant populations



India

Odisha 1,627,486  
(2011 census)<sup>[1]</sup>

### Languages

Kui, Kuvi

### Religion

Traditional beliefs, Hinduism, Christianity

### Related ethnic groups

Dravidian people •  
Dangaria Kandha •

view have been drastically changed in recent times. The traditional Khond society is based on geographically demarcated clans, each consisting of a large group of related families identified by a Totem, usually of a male wild animal. Each clan usually has a common surname, and is led by the eldest male member of the most powerful family of the clan. All the clans of the Khonds owe allegiance to the "*Kondh Pradhan*", who is usually the leader of the most powerful clan of the Khonds.

Gondi people



*A-wedding-in-Niyamgiri -Bride's friend in western Odisha's bauxite-rich Niyamgiri mountains, the sole home of the state's Dongria Kondh tribe (2009)*

The Khond family is often nuclear, although extended joint families are also found. Female family members are on equal social footing with the male members in Khond society, and they can inherit, own, hold and dispose of property without reference to their parents, husband or sons. Women have the right to choose their husbands, and seek divorce. However, the family is patrilineal and patrilocal. Remarriage is common for divorced or widowed women and men. Children are never considered illegitimate in Khond society and inherit the clan

name of their biological or adoptive fathers with all the rights accruing to natural born children. The Kondhs have a dormitory for adolescent girls and boys which forms a part of their enculturation and education process. The girls and boys sleep at night in their respective dormitory and learn social taboos, myths, legends, stories, riddles, proverbs amidst singing and dancing the whole night, thus learning the way of the tribe. The girls are usually instructed in good housekeeping and in ways to bring up good children while the boys learn the art of hunting and the legends of their brave and martial ancestors.



*A wedding in Niyamgiri in western Odisha's bauxite-rich Niyamgiri mountains, the sole home of the state's Dongria Kondh tribe (2009)*

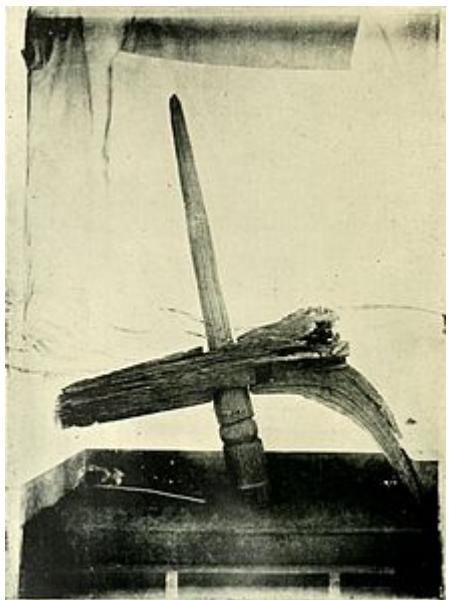
Bravery and skill in hunting determine the respect that a man gets in the Khond tribe. A large number of Khonds were recruited by the British during the First and Second World Wars and were prized as natural jungle warfare experts. Even today a large proportion of the Khond men join the state police or armed forces of India to seek an opportunity to prove their bravery. The men usually forage or hunt in the

forests. They also practise the podu system of shifting cultivation on the hill slopes where they grow different varieties of rice, lentils and vegetables. Women usually do all the household work from fetching water from the distant streams, cooking, serving food to each member of the household to assisting the men in cultivation, harvesting and sale of produce in the market.<sup>[4]</sup>

The Khond commonly practice clan exogamy. By custom, marriage must cross clan boundaries (a form of incest taboo). The clan is strictly exogamous, which means marriages are made outside the clan (yet still within the greater Khond population). The form of acquiring mate is often by negotiation. However, marriage by capture or elopement is also rarely practiced. For marriage bride price is paid to the parents of the bride by the groom, which is a striking feature of the Khonds. The bride price was traditionally paid in tiger pelts though now land or gold sovereigns are the usual mode of payment of bride price.

## Religious beliefs

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*Meriah sacrifice post.*

The Khonds were historically animists. But the extended contact with the Oriya speaking Hindus made Khonds to adopt many aspects of the Hinduism and Hindu culture. The contact with the Hindus has made the Khonds to adopt Hindu deities into their pantheon. For example, the Kali and Durga are worshiped in a variety of guises, but always with the sacrifice of goats, fowl etc. The Kond marriage rituals also show the assimilation of many Hindu customs into traditional tribal practices.<sup>[5]</sup>

Traditionally the Khond religious beliefs were syncretic combining totemism, animism, ancestor worship, shamanism and nature worship. The Khonds gave highest importance to the Earth goddess, who is held to be the creator and sustainer of the world. In the Khond society, a breach of accepted religious conduct by any member of their society invited the wrath of spirits in the form of lack of rain fall, soaking of

streams, destruction of forest produce, and other natural calamities. Hence, the customary laws, norms, taboos, and values were greatly adhered to and enforced with high to heavy punishments, depending upon the seriousness of the crimes committed. The practise of traditional religion has almost become extinct today. Many Khonds converted to Protestant Christianity in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century due to the efforts of the missionaries of the Serampore Mission. The influence of Khond traditional beliefs on Christianity can be seen in some rituals such as those associated with Easter and resurrection when ancestors are also venerated and given offerings, although the church officially rejects the traditional beliefs as pagan. Many Khonds have also converted to Islam and a great diversity of religious practises can be seen among the members of the tribe. Significantly, as with any culture, the ethical practices of the Khond reinforce the social and economic practices that define the people. Thus, the sacredness of the earth perpetuates tribal socio-economics, wherein harmony with nature and respect for ancestors is deeply embedded whereas non tribal cultures that neglect the sacredness of the land find no problem in committing deforestation, strip-mining etc., and this has led to a situation of conflict in many instances.<sup>[6]</sup>

## Economy

This section does not cite any sources.

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They have a subsistence economy based on hunting and gathering but they now primarily depend on a subsistence agriculture i.e. shifting cultivation or slash-and-burn cultivation or Podu. The Dongria Khond are excellent fruit farmers. The most striking feature of the Dongria Khonds is that they have adapted to horticulture and grow pineapple, oranges, turmeric, ginger and papaya in plenty. Forest fruit trees like mango and jackfruit are also found in huge numbers, which fulfill the major dietary chunk of the Dongrias. Besides, the Dongrias practice shifting cultivation, or *podu chasa* as it is locally called, as part of an economic need retaining the most primitive features of underdevelopment and cultural evolution.



*Traditional Medicinal Rice of Niyamgiri Hills*

The Khonds, or the Kui as they are locally known, are one of the largest tribal group in Odisha. They are known for their cultural heritage and values which center on respecting

nature. The Kandhamal district in Odisha (erstwhile a part of Phulbani district), has a fifty-five percent Khond population, and was named after the tribe.

They go out for collective hunts eating the fruits and roots they collect. They usually cook food with oil extracted from sal and mahua seeds. They also use medicinal plants. These practices make them mainly dependent on forest resources for survival. The Khonds smoke fish and meat for preservation. The Dongria clan of Khonds inhabit the steep slopes of the Niyamgiri Range of Koraput district and over the border into Kalahandi. They work entirely on the steep slopes for their livelihood.

## Uprisings

The Khonds have risen up against authority on numerous occasions. For example, in 1817 and again in 1836 they rebelled against the British East India Company.<sup>[7][8]</sup>

## Social and environmental concerns

Vedanta Resources, a UK-based mining company, threatened the future of the Dongria Khond section of this tribe as their home in the Niyamgiri Hills is rich in bauxite.<sup>[9]</sup> The bauxite is also the reason there are so many perennial streams. The

tribe's plight is the subject of a [Survival International](#) short film narrated by actress [Joanna Lumley](#).<sup>[10]</sup> In 2010 India's environment ministry ordered Vedanta Resources to halt a sixfold expansion of an aluminium refinery in Odisha.<sup>[11]</sup><sup>[12]</sup> As part of its Demand Dignity campaign, in 2011 [Amnesty International](#) published a report concerning the rights of the Dongria Kondh.<sup>[13]</sup> Vedanta has appealed against the ministerial decision.<sup>[14]</sup>

In April 2013 the [Supreme Court](#) upheld the ban on Vedanta's project in the Niyamgiri Hills, ruling that the views of those communities affected by it must be considered. All 12 tribal villages voted against the project in August 2013, and in January 2014 the [Ministry for Environment and Forests](#) stopped the project.<sup>[15]</sup>

In a case of life seeking to imitate art, the tribe appealed to [James Cameron](#) to help them stop Vedanta, reckoning that the author of the film [Avatar](#), which deals with a similar subject, would understand their plight. An advertisement in [Variety](#) magazine said: "*Appeal to James Cameron. Avatar is fantasy ... and real. The Dongria Kondh tribe in India are struggling to defend their land against a mining company hell-bent on destroying their sacred mountain. Please help the Dongria.*"<sup>[16]</sup> Other celebrities backing the campaign include

Arundhati Roy (the Booker prize-winning author), as well as the British actors Joanna Lumley and Michael Palin.<sup>[14]</sup> Lingaraj Azad, a leader of the Save Niyamgiri Committee, said the Dongria Kondh's campaign was "not just that of an isolated tribe for its customary rights over its traditional lands and habitats, but that of the entire world over protecting our natural heritage".<sup>[14]</sup>

## See also

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- Lodu Sikaka, Kondha tribal chief

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## External links

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- [Pictures](#)
- [Sinlung](#) Sinlung - Indian tribes
- [Dongria Kondh Survival International](#) (Includes Images)
- [A 5 minute video about the tribe and the challenges they face from Vedanta Resources](#)

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